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EDITORIAL

Iraq Still Needing an Exit

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The factors that argue for withdrawal in Iraq have not gone away. The U.S. must still find a way out of this mess, and tying spending to that effort makes sense. Everyone should be heartened by Baghdad's apparently improved security. Still, there are caveats about the two items cited as proof of this improvement.

Violence has reportedly dampened to pre-2006 levels, but this was deemed unacceptable even at that time.

And returning refugees still represent only a tiny portion of the estimated 2.2 million Iraqis who have fled their country since the 2003 invasion.

But if it helps, we'll say it: The surge worked in improving security.

Now, find the exit.

Efforts by House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey (D-Wis.) are correctly designed to force the administration to do just that. He has tied \$50 billion for Iraq and Afghanistan to the goal of removing troops from Iraq by December 2008. The house approved the measure 218-203; the Senate has failed to collect even the 60 votes to advance the spending bill. The Senate could take up the measure again this week. It should do so and send the measure and the message implicit in the non-binding timetable, to the president.

That message would be that improved security does not change the factors that argue for withdrawal. This is true even if the administration seems to be downgrading the benchmarks it said the Iraqi government was to be achieving. Withdrawal is still the only viable option.

Consider:

- Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shiite cleric who to varying degrees controls the Mahdi Army, has been laying low. So has his militia, apparently. This might be a matter of being stung by criticism that his thugs were titling too many civilians or, as one observer told us, of wanting to “keep his powder dry.” He has not gone away in any case.

- Iran may be cooperating in not providing insurgents with the ingredients for the deadly improvised explosive devices. But if U.S. or international pressure on the nuclear issue mounts or morphs into a military option, don't bet that this will continue.

- U.S. troop levels in Iraq, at more than 130,000, cannot be sustained without damaging U.S. military capability overall.

- Political reconciliation was to have been the bottom line for the surge. The improved security that more U.S. boots on the ground provided - years late - was to give Iraqi factions the breathing room to become a functioning government for all Iraqis.

By and large, this hasn't occurred, and prospects are not good that it will.

This slowdown in violence may be occurring because Iraqis are exhausted. Refugees could be returning because their neighbor-hoods have been cleansed of the “other side” or because more U.S. troops are keeping the peace.

But if those who backed the surge want to claim victory, please do.

Consider the corner turned.

Now, find the exit that will ensure the least amount of disruption and damage. As Obey, speaking with the Editorial Board last week put it: The surge can only produce military results, not the more sorely needed political one.